

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

June 10, 2009

The Honorable Ken Salazar
Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Salazar:

We write to request your assistance in replacing the high school facility at the Bug O Nay Ge Shig School, which is administered and funded by the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), as quickly as possible. The current facility poses serious safety, fire, and health risks to students, faculty, and staff and does not provide an adequate physical environment for learning. At the national level, we applaud your Advancing Indian Education Initiative in the FY 2010 budget and support you in your commitment to improve Indian education at the Bureau of Indian Education. At the local level, we request your assistance in improving the educational conditions at the Bug O Nay Ge Shig School through replacement of the high school.

The Bug O Nay Ge Shig School is located in Bena, Minnesota, and is operated by the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe and governed by the Bug O Nay Ge Shig School Board. The school serves nearly 300 Native American children in grades K-12 who commute from 14 communities located in five counties within a 70-mile radius of the School. The school was founded in 1975 with 35 Ojibwe students from the Leech Lake Reservation in response to parental concerns that public schools were not meeting the academic and cultural needs of Ojibwe students. Since that time, the school has transformed itself into a magnet school, teaching state-approved curricula with Ojibwe cultural components. Given the educational opportunities the school provides to Native American students, enrollment at the school has steadily increased over the years.

The elementary and middle school facilities at the school are in satisfactory condition, but the high school facility is in dire need of replacement. The current high school facility is a metal-clad pole barn, formerly used as an agricultural building. The facility has serious structural and mechanical deficiencies and lacks proper insulation. It requires numerous upgrades with regards to safety, fire, and security systems in order to make it an effective learning environment for the children it serves. Further, the building lacks a communication intercom system and telecommunication technology. Also, the facility has poor indoor air quality due to mold, fungus, and a faulty HVAC system and suffers from rodent infestation, roof leaks, uneven floors, poor lighting, sewer problems, lack of handicap access, and lack of classroom and other space. These are just a few of the facility's numerous deficiencies.

The high school facility is on the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) list of schools in need of replacement. The BIA categorizes the high school facility as being in "poor" condition. The BIA Midwest Regional Office for the Office of Indian Education Programs compiled a report in 2007, expressing strong concerns about the electrical problems, potential fire issues, and student safety. The BIA Office of Facilities, Environmental, Safety, and Cultural Management has documented the deficiencies of the high school facility, and we understand that the director of that office, Jack Rever, recently toured the high school facility. We appreciate his efforts to tour the school to see first-hand the deficiencies and poor condition of the high school and to meet with the leadership of the Leech Lake of Band of Ojibwe. The Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe and the school have prepared

design plans for a replacement high school facility and estimate the cost to be approximately \$15 million.

While we are encouraged that the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) provides \$277.7 million for BIE school construction and repair, we are disappointed to learn that the Bug O Nay Ge Shig High School may not receive any ARRA funds to replace the current facility given the critical need and urgency for a new facility. We also note that the President's FY 2010 budget includes \$113 million for facilities replacement and other construction at the Bureau of Indian Education. The FY 2010 budget proposes a \$16.4 million reduction from the FY 2009 enacted level for BIE school construction based upon the justification that ARRA provided \$277.7 million for BIE education construction.

Our hope is that your department can provide us with a plan for replacement of the high school in the near future. In addition, we also request information about the current status of this project on BIE's school construction lists. As you know, the education of the students at the Bug O Nay Ge Shig School is a trust responsibility of the United States, and ensuring adequate educational facilities is part of this responsibility.

Thank you for your efforts on behalf of the Bug O Nay Ge Shig School, and we look forward to hearing from you on the department's efforts to address this situation so that these students can have a physical environment that is safe and fosters a quality learning environment.

Sincerely,


Senator Amy Klobuchar


Rep. James L. Oberstar


Rep. Betty McCollum